A Chinese Visitor to Angkor
(14th century)

The Three Religious Groups

There are three religious groups: the pan-ch’i, or men of learning; the bonzes, or Buddhist monks, called ch’i-jo (Siamese: jao-jo = "my lord"); and the Taoists, or po-tao-wei.

As for the pan-ch’i (pandits, in this passage Brahmins), I am unable to say what inherited creed lies back of them, as they have no school or seminary for training. It is equally difficult to find out what are their sacred books. I have only observed that they dress like men of the people, except that all their lives they wear round the neck a white thread that marks them as men of learning. The pan-ch’i often rise to high position.

The Buddhist monks ch’i-jo duv shave the head, wear yellow robes, bare the right shoulder, knot a strip of yellow cloth round the waist and go barefoot. Their temples, which are often roofed with tiles, contain only one statue, closely resembling the Buddha Sakyyamuni, which is called Po-lai (Po Prab). Moulded from clay, it is painted in various colors and draped with red. On the other hand, the Buddhists do the towers are of bronze. There are no bells, no drums, no cymbals, no banners. The food of the bonzes is universally fish or meat, which is also set as an offering before the Buddhists; but no wine may be drunk. They content themselves with one meal a day, which is partaken of at the home of a patron, no cooking being done in the monasteries. The numerous holy books that they can are made of strips of palm-leaf, neatly bound together. These strips are covered with black characters, but no brush or ink is used; their manner of writing is a mystery. To certain monks is given the right to use palm-nuts with golden shafts and parasols with gold or silver handles. These men are consulted by the King in matters of serious import.

There are no Buddhist nuns.

The Taoists po-tao-wei are clothed like men of the people, save that on their heads they wear a white or red hood, like the kah-ku of the Mongol women, but worn lower. They, too, have monasteries, but smaller than the Buddhist temples, for Taoists do not attain the prosperity of the Buddhist sectarians. They worship nothing but a block of stone (feng) similar to that on the altar of the God of the Earth in China. Again, I do not know on what their creed is patterned. There are no Taoist nuns. Taoists are permitted to roof their temples with tiles. They do not share the food of others, nor do they eat in public. They allow themselves no wine. I have never been present at readings of their holy books, nor observed their acquiring merit through acts of kindness.
Children of the laity who attend their schools become novices of the house who teach them. When they have grown up, they return to lay life. I was unable to make detailed investigation of all this.

The Natives

The customs common to all the southern barbarians are found throughout Cambodias, whose inhabitants are coarse people, ugly and deeply sunburned. This is true not only of those living in the remote fastnesses of the sea islands but of the dwellers in centers of population. It applies equally to the ladies of the court and to the womenfolk of the noble houses, whose pillar, like that of jade, comes from being sheltered away from the fierce sunlight. Generally speaking, the women, like the men, wear only a strip of cloth, bound round the waist, showing bare breasts of milky whiteness. Their hair is fastened up in a knot, and they go barefoot, even the wives of the King, who are five in number, one of whom dwells in the central palace and one at each of the four cardinal points. As for the concubines and palace girls, I have heard it said that there are from three to five thousand of them, separated into various categories. They are seldom seen beyond the palace gates.

Every time I was admitted to the palace for an audience with the King, he came forward with his chief wife and took his seat in the embrasure of the golden window in the main audience hall. The ladies of the court were drawn up on both sides of the veranda below the window, changing places now and then to get a better look at us, and thus giving me a good chance to see them. When a beautiful girl is born into a family, no time is lost in sending her to the palace.

In a lower category are the women who do errands for the palace; of these, called ch'én-chi-lan (= Sanskrit leghara) there are at least two thousand, all married, with homes throughout the city. The hair of the forehead is shaved high after the manner of the northern people and a vermilion mark is made here, as well as on each temple. This is the distinctive sign of the ch'én-chi-lan. Only these women are given entry to the palace, which is forbidden to all of lesser rank. They move in an unbroken stream through the streets in front of and behind the palace.

Women of the people knot their hair, but there is no sign of hairpins or comb, or any other adornment of the head. On their arms they wear gold bracelets and rings of gold on their fingers; the palace women
and the court ladies also observe this fashion. Men and women alike are anointed with perfumes compounded of sandalwood, musk, and other essences.

Worship of the Buddha is universal.
In the market place groups of ten or more caracoles are to be seen every day, making efforts to catch the attention of the Chinese in the hope of rich presents. A revolting, unworthy custom, this!

Childbirth

Once a Cambodian woman’s child is born, she immediately makes a poultice of hot rice and salt and applies it to her private parts. This is taken off in twenty-four hours, thus preventing any untoward after-effects and causing an astringency which seems to renew the young mother’s vigour. When told of this for the first time, my credulity was sorely taxed. However, in the house where I lodged a girl gave birth to a child, and I was able to observe beyond peradventure that the next day she was up carrying the baby in her arms and going with him to bathe in the river. This seems truly amazing!

Everyone with whom I talked said that the Cambodian women are highly sexed. One or two days after giving birth to a child they are ready for intercourse; if a husband is not responsive he will be discarded. When a husband is called away on matters of business, they endure his absence for a while; but if he is gone as much as ten days, the wife is apt to say, "I am no ghost; how can I be expected to sleep alone?" Though their sexual impulses are very strong, it is said some of them remain faithful.

The Cambodian women age very rapidly, doubtless because of the early marriage and motherhood. When twenty or thirty years old they resemble Chinese women of forty or fifty.
Maidenhood in Cambodia

When a daughter is born to a Cambodian family, it is customary for the parents to express for her the wish: "May the future bring that a hundred, a thousand husbands!" Daughters of rich parents, from seven to nine years of age (or eleven, in the case of poor people) are handed over to a Buddhist or Taoist priest for deflowering, a ceremony known as chen-sun. Each year the proper authorities choose a day of the month corresponding to the fourth Chinese moon and let this be known throughout the country. Every family with a daughter ripe for chen-sun then notifies the authorities, who send a taper bearing on its length a certain mark. At nightfall on the proper day the candle is lighted, and when it burns down to the mark the moment for chen-sun has come.

A fortnight before this the family will have chosen a priest—Buddhist or Taoist according to their place of residence. The services of the higher class of priests are all engaged in advance by the families of wealth or social prominence, while the poor have no time for making distinctions. The former load the priests with presents of wine, rice, fabrics, silk, meau-sau, silver plate, in value often reaching one hundred pects, or two or three hundred ounces in Chinese money. Presents from people of lesser station may be worth thirty or forty pects, according to the size of the family fortunes. If poor girls find themselves approaching their eleventh birthday without getting together sufficient money to pay the priest, it often happens that generous people of means help with a contribution, which they call "acquiring merit." A priest is not allowed to perform the ceremony for more than one girl a year, and once he has accepted his fee he cannot pledge himself to initiate a second one.

The night of the ceremony a great feast, with music, is prepared. In front of the girl's house a platform is erected on which are placed figures of animals and persons, sometimes ten or more in number, often less. Nothing of this sort is expected of the poor. Following an ancient tradition these figureines remain in place for a week. Next, a procession with palanquins, gongs, and music sets out to fetch the priest. Two pavilions hung with brilliantly coloured silks have been set up; in one of these is seated the priest, the maiden in the other. Words are exchanged between the two, but they can scarcely be heard, so deafening is the music, for on such occasions it is lawful to shatter the peace of the night. I have been told that at a given moment the priest enters the maiden's pavilion and deflowers her with his hand, dropping the first fruits into a vessel of wine. It is said that the father and mother, the relations and neighbors, stain their foreheads with this wine, or even taste it. Some also say that the priest has intercourse with the girl; others deny this. As Chinese are not allowed to witness these proceedings, the exact truth is hard to learn.

At daybreak the priest is escorted back home with palanquins, parasites, and music, after which it is customary to buy the girl back from the priest with presents of silk and other fabrics; otherwise she becomes his property forever and cannot marry. What I saw of these proceedings took place on the sixth night of the fourth moon of the year 1929 on the period 4-3, of the period 6-3 (April 28, 1929). Before the ceremony the father, the mother and the daughter had always slept in the same room; afterwards, the room was closed to the young woman, who went wherever she pleased, with no constraint.

When it comes to weddings it is the custom to make presents of textiles; this obligation is lightly assumed, however, as bride and groom have often had pre-nuptial intercourse. In this there is seen no cause for shame, or even surprise. The night of the chen-sun more than ten families often perform the ceremony at the same time, processions of Buddhists and Taoists meeting and crossing in the streets. Everywhere there is the sound of music.